

FICTION, EMPATHY, AND AUTOMATISM:
LIFE AT THE CENTRE OF FUZZTOPIA

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Abstract

Welcome to Fuzztopia is a multimedia art exhibition comprised of found objects and circuit bent electronics, which have been altered and hybridized to create sculptures of eccentric alien creatures. These creatures are known as Fuzztopians, denizens of a fictional living planetoid, who interact with one another in a society based around dignity, respect, and unconditional love. The central goals of this body of work are to spread joy to its audience, and to encourage them to treat others as the Fuzztopians treat one another. This is accomplished first and foremost through the means of fiction and storytelling. Taking advantage of fiction's ability to draw in its audience and aid them to empathize with a story and its characters, Fuzztopia serves as an avenue through which its audience can befriend its inhabitants, and grow to understand their unique perspectives. Secondly, the exhibition communicates with the viewing public through the nonverbal visual language of contemporary North American commercial culture. This common, familiar, and ubiquitous aesthetic is fused with blatantly fun and eccentric visual signifiers, inspired by alternative cartooning, experimental video games, and contemporary sculpture. These imaginative elements all coalesce to form an immersive environment of safety and comfort, wherein the audience may become acquainted with and learn from everyday objects that are commonly taken for granted.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to Fuzztopia

Welcome to Fuzztopia is an exhibition of physical sculptural artwork that is held in room 292.2 in the Murray building at the University of Saskatchewan. As indicated in its title, this exhibition fixates on and depicts an imaginary world known as Fuzztopia. This fictional ecosystem exists inside of a small planetoid, located in a nondescript area between the planet Earth and Venus. The geological, atmospheric, and ecological elements of Fuzztopia are wildly unlike those with which human beings are familiar, most noticeably in that the planetoid itself is an organism that has given birth to its inhabitants. The entirety of the planetoid is a singular, diverse ecosystem comprised of life that morphs, combines, and contradicts humans' understanding and classification of life on the planet Earth—some Fuzztopians physically resemble fusions of plants, animals, and fungi; some function similarly to protozoa on a macroscopic scale; and still others operate in a fashion entirely alien to humans. As an organism, Fuzztopia is able to move and react to activity that occurs on and inside itself. Fuzztopians gain energy by consuming effervescent spheres of electricity, produced by Fuzztopia in a process similar to photosynthesis that converts the Sun's heat into nourishment. The planetoid produces a violet fluid as a by-product of this electrical food production, which orbits its atmosphere and provides a home for certain well-adapted Fuzztopians. Throughout their life cycles, Fuzztopians constantly metamorphose into creatures of very different appearances that occupy different ecological niches, continuously transforming as opposed to reaching the end of a lifespan and ceasing to exist. Though life on Fuzztopia comes in a seemingly infinite number of permutations, all Fuzztopians effortlessly coexist, support, and love one another and their home.

Chapter 2.1: The Process—

The Materials

My artistic practice is predominantly based around physical media and materials. Both with regards to the conceptual elements of the work, as well as the process by which the work is conceived and executed, my work heavily relies on my interactions with and ability to manipulate corporeal objects. In this way, my working methods are almost exclusively improvisational—the actions that I take to create my work are direct responses to the physical characteristics and perceived “personalities” of the objects with which I work. Though I often draw out and prototype designs before I put them into practice, the majority of the gestures that go into creating a piece are based on my gut-level intuition.

Found objects are the materials with which I have interacted the most in order to create this body of work. These are mass-produced objects that had been previously owned by a person or group of people other than myself, which I have either purchased (from a second-hand store) or procured (from areas where objects are discarded to be destroyed, recycled, or relocated to a landfill). Most of the found objects from which my work is constructed are children’s playthings—action figures, dolls, stuffed animals, and electronic toys that seek to educate or entertain toddlers with lights, sounds, and motion. These are the objects that are the most easily recognizable in my finished pieces, and whose aesthetic qualities are the most clearly reflected in this body of work as a whole. For all intents and purposes, these playthings are the subject of my artwork.

In addition to children’s toys, the found objects from which my works are constructed also include fabric from old clothing, paper from obsolete textbooks, fragments of broken furniture, electronic components from dusty radio circuit boards, disused analog media players, and scraps of wood, cardboard, and fiberboard. These materials are used in tandem with the found toys to physically support or visually accentuate them. The furniture, wood, and cardboard are used to create armatures atop which many of the creatures and landscape elements are built. The fabric and the fur from stuffed animals form the “skin” or exteriors of many works throughout the exhibit. The media players and electronic components are incorporated alongside the moving and

speaking creatures to enhance their gestures and verbalizations, such as distorting the sound of their voices. Lastly, the pages of the discarded books are utilized to create papier-mâché, which is used to bridge areas together and create texture. These various media are integrated in a multitude of different ways throughout this body of work, forming the visual language and aesthetic of *Welcome to Fuzztopia*.

Chapter 2.2: The Process

The Bricolage

The most basic, rudimentary means by which materials are used to create my works are processes of alteration. I cut, dismantle, combine, and reorient various found objects to create my pieces, each time incorporating several media of varying textures, shapes, and colors to create individual, holistic works. Often, the rough seams, joints, and holes created by these processes are covered and smoothed over with papier-mâché and acrylic paint. In addition to these two materials, the fabrics and faux furs in my pieces are sewn together by hand in most pieces, with the occasional use of a sewing machine to sew larger and more complex shapes. These methods of working are decidedly simple, homespun, and at times unrefined. Most crucially, they are also gestures and techniques that one often learns at an early age. I gained rudimentary skills in a wood shop setting, as well as painting and papier-mâché construction during pre-school; and I first learned how to properly sew at the age of twelve.¹ Though my implementation of these skills and techniques is significantly more sophisticated than they were when I was a child, they are nevertheless skills and techniques that form the foundation of my career as an artist. These have re-emerged in my artistic practice in recent years in part because I am currently working in an improvisational manner, thus causing me to resort to skills and techniques that are primal to my practice. Simultaneously, the very nature of the materials with which I interface to create Fuzztopia have also led me to work in this manner. The vast majority of the objects present in my work are reminiscent of those that populated my life in early childhood and adolescence. I would rarely (if ever) discard or give away stuffed animals or plastic figurines throughout my youth—to the point where (as of writing) my parents' home continues to be filled to the brim with my old childhood paraphernalia. I have a deep appreciation for these types of objects and the visual language with which they are designed, and a core part of who I am is defined by the love, respect, and empathy that I feel towards them.

Every Body Matters (fig. 1) is one of the very first Fuzztopians I had built. The underlying structure of their body is comprised of a children's toy guitar, which is shaped like a cartoon dog.

¹ Similarly, clay was one of the first artistic media with which I interacted. This was used to create a single ceramic piece in the *Fuzztopia* show.

In order to create the piece, I chopped off the toy's head and most of its neck, and covered it with fabric (mostly taken from a large, rainbow-colored chameleon Beanie Baby plush toy), painted papier-mâché, and image transfers (which are drawings of electric zaps that I cut out of a well-worn Halloween-themed children's picture book). Their mouth, teeth, and tongue were sewn by hand from second-hand fabrics, and the green lumps emerging from their back are made from sanded wooden spheres that I coated in papier-mâché and acrylic paint. ... *That I Think Kind Thoughts and Have a Loving Heart* (fig. 2), on the other hand, is made up entirely of hand-sewn and painted fabrics. Her body is that of a singing elephant plush toy made for babies, whose head and limbs I reoriented to create a more alien-looking creature. Her eyes are those of a plush green Tyrannosaurus rex, and her elongated appendage is formed from two plush owls from the same toy line (one purple and one blue, each coincidentally found in two separate second-hand shops), along with a stuffed anthropomorphic banana whose body I reshaped. Lastly, *Octuplets* (fig. 3) is made entirely out of plastic and papier-mâché. The base of the creature is made from two plastic penguin toys: one large penguin whose belly opens to reveal a fake refrigerator, and one small electronic penguin whose buttons emit light and play well-known children's songs (such as "Frère Jacques" and "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star") when pressed. The two penguins are joined together with screws, and heavily coated in papier-mâché and paint. Emerging from this two-headed creature are six smaller critters. Each of them was created by first making papier-mâché casts from the packaging of a dollar store toy bear, each of which I then altered with additional papier-mâché in order to differentiate them from one another. The smaller penguin's electronics were altered, and modified to have an external activator button and elongated LED tendrils. The audio is emitted from a speaker inside the larger penguin's head, and is amplified by a small circuit inside their belly.



Fig. 1 *Every Body Matters* (2020). Found objects, circuit bent electronics, acrylic, image transfers, and fabric.

Fig. 2 ... *That I Think Kind Thoughts and Have a Loving Heart* (2019-2020). Acrylic, circuit bent toys, fabric, and found objects.



Fig. 3 *Octuplets* (2020). Acrylic and papier-mâché on found objects; circuit bent electronics.



Though these humble materials are at the forefront of my work, not all aspects of building my art are so conventionally crude. The bodies of my creatures are assembled through collage and bricolage techniques, whereas their innards are created through more technically complex means. There is circuitry of some shape or form within each Fuzztopian that causes them to move, make noise, and/or emit light. These gestures are most often produced either by found and altered circuit boards (once again taken from children's toys), or by circuits that were handmade from scratch by myself. However, several Fuzztopians also contain more complex electronics, such as televisions and media players. These creatures each play video clips through screens embedded into their bodies. In the case of *The Waddlers* and *Ziggy Iggy*, the videos were filmed, animated, and edited by myself. *The Waddlers'* video (fig. 4) is a claymation of the critter's innards, with heavily altered coloration and accompanied by an audio clip produced by a modified greeting card. *Ziggy Iggy* (fig. 5), on the other hand, consists of a video conversation between two puppets. These two puppets are characters that I had created at the age of twelve,² who communicate through edited dialogue from public domain self-help videos. The words spoken by Iggy (the character on the left) are written out in traditional ink calligraphy, which were scanned and animated frame-by-frame in Photoshop to stretch and fly across the screen. Atop both characters is a rotoscoped line animation of a dizzy Cartoon Network character, which loops for the first five seconds of the video. The dialogue, which consists of Iggy panicking as Ziggy comforts him, has been split into two separate outputs, each of which is altered by different analogue circuitry.³ Lastly, *No One Batted an Eye* (fig. 6) consists of a portable television embedded into a papier-mâché creature. The five-inch screen broadcasts distorted black and white video of a *Muppets* film on VHS.

Though these videos were crafted primarily utilizing digital software, the processes by which they were created and assembled are identical to those used to create the physical sculptures. The public domain audio was chopped up and reassembled as I would chop and reassemble a plastic action figure, and the Cartoon Network animation was rotoscoped in much the same way as I would paint over and emphasize the facial features of a baby toy. Much like the found objects

² Similarly, the piece *Sleepyhead* is a soft sculpture of a character who I had created around that same time, but who was the protagonist of an altogether different story.

³ This is an act of translation to the native language of Fuzztopia: Noise.

used to create the Fuzztopians, these pieces of media have also been abandoned: Television programs whose copyright has expired and will never be aired again; analogue tape technology that only barely survives into the 21st century; and even the technique of claymation (once the pinnacle of film special effects)⁴ has now been reduced to a charming artifact of bygone days. All media and processes of creation present in *Welcome to Fuzztopia* are interconnected, and are unified by their shared history as abandoned, forgotten, or underappreciated relics.

⁴ James J. Clauss, “‘Now my charms are all o’erthrown’: Intertextuality and the Theme of Succession and Replacement in *Clash of the Titans* (1981),” *Classical World* 111, no. 4 (Summer 2018), 550.



Fig. 4 *The Waddlers* (2020-2021) (video still). Found objects, papier-mâché, acrylic, electronics, and fabric.

Fig. 5 *Ziggy Iggy* (2019-2021). Digital video, found objects, fabric, acrylic, and papier-mâché.

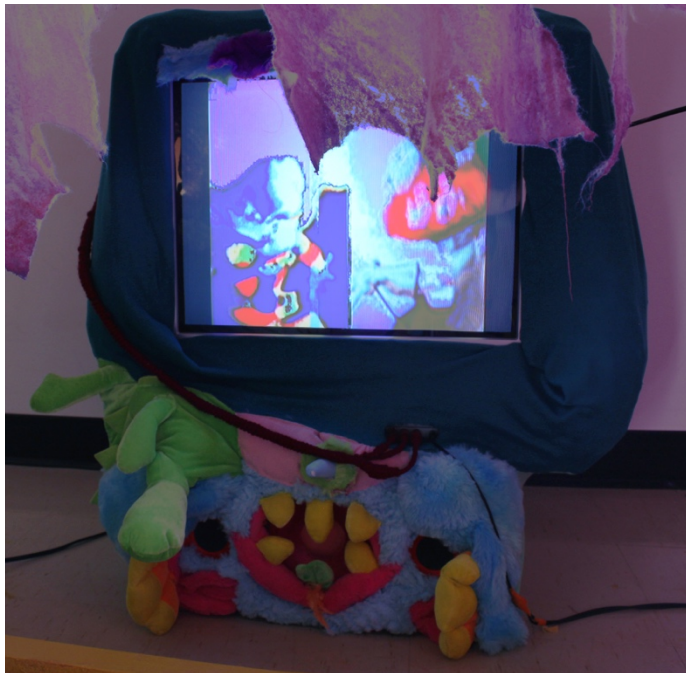
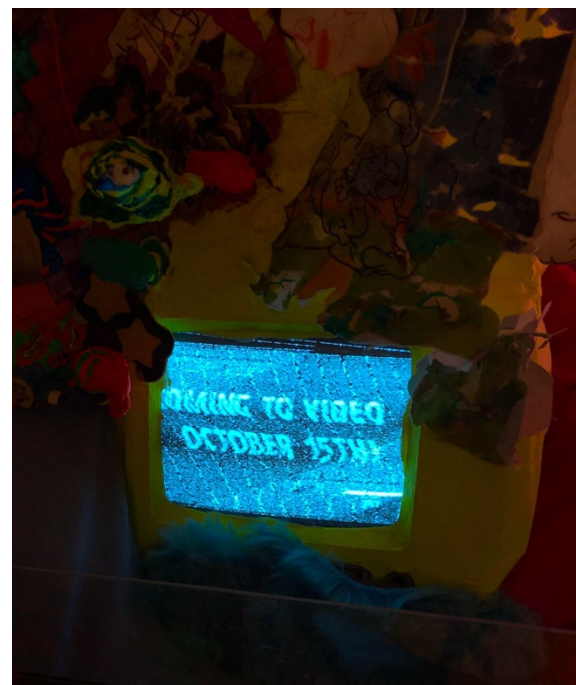


Fig. 6 *No One Batted an Eye* (2019-2021) (detail). Analogue video, found objects, papier-mâché, acrylic, and fabric.



Chapter 2.3: The Process

The Bending

Aside from materials that adorn or physically connect objects together, every piece of media that goes into creating *Welcome to Fuzztopia* has a pre-existing life and history to it. This is no exception when it comes to the “guts” of the Fuzztopians: their electronics. These circuits are found in the electronic toys that are used to create the Fuzztopians’ bodies, derived from antiquated pieces of analogue technology (such as transistor radios), or are handmade by myself. In all cases, the electronics in Fuzztopia have been altered and mangled in a process commonly known as circuit bending. Originally coined by artist and musician Qubais Reed Ghazala, who began pursuing the practice in the mid-to-late 1960s,⁵ circuit bending involves the intentional and “creative short-circuiting of consumer electronics.”⁶ It is a chance-based practice that produces consistently unpredictable results, and can be enacted in the most basic of ways by wiring together two disparate solder points on a circuit board at random.⁷ Circuit bending is a means of “hacking” into a piece of electronics in order to expose a hidden malfunction—a latent, dormant action that the circuitry was always capable of performing, but was deemed unnecessary or undesirable by its manufacturers. This improvisational process of altering found consumer products, which is intended to reveal an underlying intrinsic element of the circuitry, mimics those processes utilized to physically construct Fuzztopia and its denizens in intent, simplicity, and aesthetic extremity. The alteration of the objects used to construct the Fuzztopians is an improvisational means of discovering their innate personalities; and the audio produced by the circuit bent electronics are bright, loud, and overwhelming—just like the physiology of the Fuzztopians to whom these voices belong. Whether visual or auditory, all elements of the Fuzztopians seek to accomplish the same goal: to express the infectiously vivacious, unbridled, and unruly personalities of these alien creatures.

⁵ Reed Ghazala, *Circuit-Bending: Build Your Own Alien Instruments* (Indianapolis: Wiley Publishing, Inc., 2005), 8.

⁶ Garnet Hertz and Jussi Parikka, “Zombie Media: Circuit Bending Media Archaeology into Art Method,” *Leonardo* 45, no. 5 (2012), 426.

⁷ Ghazala, *Circuit-Bending*, 4.

Chapter 3.1: The Poetics

The Science

All elements present in *Welcome to Fuzztopia*, though they originate from seemingly disparate disciplines, coalesce to form the titular fictional planetoid and its inhabitants. The exhibition exists as a physical manifestation of a mythology and fictional ecosystem of my own invention that I have catalogued through writing and illustration. Bringing Fuzztopia to life in this way serves the primary purpose of providing the exhibition's human audience with a model of society which they may aspire to emulate—it exists specifically in relation to our own familiar world and way of life. Though the planetoid is clearly fictional, and differs from the planet Earth in ways that have yet to be observed by scientists in any field, there are crucial parallels between Fuzztopia and Earth.⁸ Similar to Fuzztopia (though clearly much more extreme in the case of the planetoid), a prominent theory is that life on Earth emerged naturally from matter on the planet itself,⁹ ¹⁰ all matter on Earth is formed from the same fundamental building blocks (atoms),¹¹ and the planet Earth has at various points been interpreted as an organism, in the sense that it changes and reacts to the conditions and circumstances with which it is presented.¹² Fuzztopia is a parallel, alternate version of Earth, wherein conflict is nonviolent, and life is able to be enjoyed to the fullest by all of its inhabitants.

By its very nature, fiction has the capacity to realize impossible, invented worlds, characters, and scenarios. It is an avenue through which one could imagine alternate realities, possible futures, and ways of being that are far removed from the human experience in ways that we can easily digest and understand. One core advantage of these attributes is that, regardless of how absurd a work may be, a piece of fiction inevitably has a relationship with its human audience. This, in

⁸ To commemorate this, I have given Fuzztopia the scientific Latin name “minima vicinus” (“tiny neighbor”), as it exists as a companion to Earth.

⁹ Falk Wachowius, James Attwater, and Philipp Holliger, “Nucleic acids: function and potential for abiogenesis,” *Quarterly Reviews of Biophysics* 50, no. 4 (2017), 1.

¹⁰ It must be noted that this is by no means the sole theory for the origin of life on Earth, and this process of abiogenesis is not definitively accepted as concrete fact. Regardless of its veracity, it is this type of theory that directly influenced the mythos of Fuzztopia.

¹¹ Achille C. Varzi, “On being ultimately composed of atoms,” *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 174, no. 11 (November 2017), 2891.

¹² Giulia Rispoli, “Between ‘Biosphere’ and ‘Gaia’: Earth as a Living Organism in Soviet Geo-Ecology,” *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* 10, no. 2 (2014), 86-87.

essence, is much of the purpose of fiction as a whole: to provide humans with ways on which to reflect upon themselves.¹³ When that dividing barrier between reality and fantasy is rendered hazy, however, then that relationship is further complicated.

The Snouters: Form and Life of the Rhinogrades is an unsuspecting text. It is a small, thin, almost pamphlet-like book consisting of rigid scientific language and detailed illustrations. The book contains thorough physical descriptions, behavioral documentation, and evolutionary hypotheses relating to a very specific order of animals. It is also entirely fictitious. Originally published in 1957 by German zoologist Gerolf Steiner,¹⁴ *The Snouters* is a book that explores its titular order of shrew-like mammals, who are defined by their unusual musculature emerging from their snouts, which serve as their primary means of locomotion.¹⁵ In adapting to the environment of the fictional Hy-Yi-Yi Archipelago—which, when compared to the neighboring New Zealand, “... contains an incomparably greater variety and peculiarity of native groups of organisms”¹⁶—the Snouters have developed to fill unexpected and incredibly diverse ecological niches. There are Snouters who slide on their noses as though they were slugs,¹⁷ underwater filter feeders whose noses act as buoys,¹⁸ furry insectivores that use their noses to leap large distances,¹⁹ and beautifully-colored stealthy predators stood atop rigid twenty-inch tails that lure in their prey with their convincingly flower-like noses.²⁰ At no point in the text does Steiner admit to the falsehood of his writing (going so far as reinforcing the book with an evidently fake bibliography),²¹ and further claims in the book’s epilogue that the Hy-Yi-Yi Archipelago had been destroyed during tests of nuclear explosives, thus removing any and all evidence of the Snouters, their home, and all scientists who were in the process of studying the creatures.²²

¹³ Lars Bernaerts, Marco Caracciolo, Luc Herman, and Bart Varvaeck, “The Storied Lives of Non-Human Narrators,” *Narrative* 22, no. 1 (January 2014), 82-83.

¹⁴ Steiner has published his work under various absurd pen names, in this case opting for the title of Harald Stümpke.

¹⁵ Gerolf Steiner, *The Snouters: Life and Form of the Rhinogrades*, trans. Leigh Chadwick (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), xv-xvi.

¹⁶ Steiner, *The Snouters*, x.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 5-6.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 19-20.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 35-36.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 72-74.

²¹ *Ibid*, 89-92.

²² *Ibid*, 87.

The Snouters presents its titular class of organisms to the reader as though they were actual, naturally-occurring animals that at one time fulfilled a wide array of ecological niches. In so doing, Steiner asks the reader to accept them as plausible, and to admire them as marvels of evolution—despite the fact that they are entirely invented. In this way, Steiner poses the question of whether it truly matters that the Snouters do not exist, and have never existed. Regardless of the veracity of the literature, *The Snouters* is the only evidence of the titular animals ever even existing. And yet, in spite of the fact that they only exist within the pages of a single book, the Snouters remain an incredible order of organisms to behold. They inspire intrigue and wonder about our natural world, and their hypothetical existence introduces interesting questions about humans’ collective position on planet Earth in relation to all other life. Such concerns, not only about the world around us, but about ourselves as well, are amongst the most crucial things that fiction can cause to emerge.

In his 2006 speculative fiction book *All Tomorrows: A Billion Year Chronicle of the Myriad Species and Varying Fortunes of Man*, artist and researcher C. M. Kosemen²³ chronicles the diversification and evolution of the human species following a brutal encounter with an alien race. In this far-off hypothetical future, humanity is conquered by an impossibly powerful alien race known as the Qu, who then proceed to genetically modify and engineer the human species into a myriad of bizarre post-humanoid creatures for their own amusement. The Qu eventually depart from our corner of the universe, leaving the remnants of humanity to fend and develop for themselves.²⁴ The book is written in small, chapter-like chunks, each one discussing either an event in this hypothetical history, or detailing the culture, physiology, and progression of a particular post-human species. The descriptions and illustrations of these creatures are bizarre and often absurd; including a group of porpoise-like aquatic humanoids (“The Swimmers”),²⁵ fields of interlocked masses of flesh and eyeballs (“The Colonials”),²⁶ and a mentally-stunted bird-like species that served as carefree pampered pets for the Qu (“The Hedonists”).²⁷ Despite how frightening their physiology may be, *All Tomorrows’* post-humans continue to demonstrate

²³ In a similar fashion to Steiner, Kosemen self-published *All Tomorrows* under the alias Nemo Ramjet.

²⁴ C. M. Kosemen, *All Tomorrows: A Billion Year Chronicle of the Myriad Species and Varying Fortunes of Man* (self-pub., 2006), 15-17.

²⁵ Kosemen, *All Tomorrows*, 28-29.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 36-37.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 52-53.

distinctly human traits—they aspire, they innovate, and they overcome adversity. Though the ways of life of many of the post-human species prove to be unsustainable,²⁸ these organisms still strive to succeed. The Swimmers eventually master their environment and the organisms around them,²⁹ the Colonials evolve until they are able to work in concert with one another as a group of modular organisms,³⁰ and the Hedonists (though their lives continue to be rather simple) create and celebrate their own cultural traditions.³¹ *All Tomorrows* is empathetic and compassionate towards the post-humans, because it provides these conventionally hideous, frightening, animalistic creatures with a sense of interiority. It brings us to no longer see ourselves as superior to and removed from them and their struggles. Though they are placed in various extreme and difficult situations that we will likely never experience ourselves, we can see ourselves in them. We can identify with them.

²⁸ Ibid, 61.

²⁹ Ibid, 67-68.

³⁰ Ibid, 71-72.

³¹ Ibid, 81-82.

Chapter 3.2: The Poetics

The Fiction

The way in which people commonly engage with narratives is by immersing themselves into the stories' imagined worlds, and identifying themselves with their inhabitants.³² Not only have such acts of projection been observed in the human brain via fMRI scans—an act of “strong perspectival alignment”³³ within a narrative—but consumers of a piece of media (readers, listeners, viewers, players, etc.) also determine much of its relevance based on how easily they are capable of identifying with it.³⁴ Perhaps one is directly familiar with the particular subject or setting of a work,³⁵ or they aspire to experience the events depicted in a work.³⁶ Engaging with a work may even offer one the opportunity to cathartically experience something dangerous, frightening, or socially deplorable within a safe medium.³⁷ Regardless of which element draws one to immerse oneself into a narrative, an integral component of fiction and narratives as a whole is the way in which an audience can place themselves within a work. Steiner's book entices the reader through its sense of mystery and sheer wonder, tapping into the imagination and curiosity of his audience. Kosemen's story, on the other hand, is written in such a way to be easy for a wide variety of readers to identify with it—*All Tomorrows* is ultimately a story of the collective struggles and triumphs of humanity, in which the average reader would have a natural vested interest. With regards to fiction that depicts and fixates on an alien or wholly unfamiliar subject, however, humans are still more than capable of immersing themselves into the narrative.

Coinciding with the emergence of mass media in the wake of the proliferation of the television (in the mid-20th century) is the increased awareness of a concept known as the parasocial relationship.³⁸ Beyond empathizing with the lyrics of a sad song, or aspiring to be just like the star of an action movie when one grows up, a parasocial relationship with a piece of media

³² M. Angeles Martínez, “Storyworld Possible Selves and the Phenomenon of Narrative Immersion: Testing a New Theoretical Construct,” *Narrative* 22, no. 1 (January 2014), 110-111.

³³ Martínez, “Storyworld Possible Selves,” 112.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 117-120.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 122.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 124.

³⁸ Edward Schiappa, Peter B. Gregg, and Dean E. Hewes, “The Parasocial Contact Hypothesis,” *Communication Monographs* 72, no. 1 (March 2005), 92-93.

places the audience in a position where they personally feel as though they have formed a relationship with its characters—as though these characters were real individuals.³⁹ An extension of social actions that occur naturally in interpersonal interactions—relating oneself to another, judging another’s actions, and feeling empathy towards another⁴⁰—parasocial actions are an avenue through which an audience situates themselves in relation to an artwork. Furthermore, as outlined by Schiappa, Gregg, and Hughes, parasocial contact with a piece of media whose characters and/or subject matter are incongruent with the audience’s own life experiences provides the audience with a means to empathize with said media—and, by extension, empathize with real people groups, communities, and cultures that are different from their own:

The research on parasocial relationships suggest that the processes involved in positive intergroup contact [...] can be reproduced through mediated contact. One can learn about a minority group from mediated messages and representations, and if one has a positive experience, one’s behavior is altered in that one normally will seek out additional (parasocial) contact rather than avoid it. One can develop affective ties with persons known only through mediated communication, and, whether one reappraises one’s beliefs about one’s ingroup or not, the resulting parasocial relationships could encourage a change in prejudicial attitudes about the outgroups to which minority characters belong.⁴¹

This parasocial contact hypothesis by no means guarantees that all individuals experiencing a certain piece of media will empathize with it in the same way—there is a high degree of variability in how one engages with and is affected by a piece of media.⁴² However, media retains a certain power over their audience, even when said audience is presented with a wholly alien subject matter.

Fuzztopia diverges from the Snouters, Kosemen’s post-humans, and stories told through traditional and time-tested means (such as literature) in that it is simultaneously a fictional story and an installation of real, physical objects. The mythology of Fuzztopia tells the story of hypothetical organic creatures, whereas the Fuzztopians present in the exhibition are a bricolage of found objects. The conceptual through line connecting these two layers of fiction is that the Fuzztopians are anthropomorphized: they are imbued with personalities and quirks, and they are social creatures (just like humans) who organize themselves into discrete communities. One is

³⁹ Edward Schiappa, Peter B. Gregg, and Dean E. Hewes, “The Parasocial Contact Hypothesis,” 95.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 96.

⁴¹ Ibid, 97.

⁴² Martínez, “Storyworld Possible Selves,” 128.

thus capable of aligning one's perspectives with the Fuzztopians, discovering mutual desires and goals one has in common with them, and forming parasocial relationships with them because the Fuzztopians' personalities and behaviors render them relatable and animate. At its most basic level, anthropomorphism is the mapping of the aforementioned perspectival alignment onto non-human things, "... going beyond purely behavioral or dispositional inferences about a nonhuman agent[, and going so far as] attributing human form or a human mind to the agent."⁴³ As is the case with empathy and parasocial behavior in relation to a piece of fiction, one's tendency to anthropomorphize a thing is highly contextual and subjective,⁴⁴ but there are general trends that tend to lead one to do so. This includes the non-human thing's capacity to express what appear to be complex emotions such as shame, hope, guilt, or nostalgia;⁴⁵ but it can also be as simple as the thing being capable of some sort of human-like vocal speech,⁴⁶ or even the capability of apparent autonomous motion.⁴⁷ ⁴⁸ It is through this avenue of anthropomorphizing that human viewers are capable not only of interpreting the Fuzztopians as being animated with some form of life, but also of feeling empathy toward them, and understanding their ways of life. The awkward, toddler-like movements of *The Waddlers* (fig. 7); the squealed vocalizations of ... *That I Think Kind Thoughts and Have a Loving Heart*, and the irreverent smile and mocking extended tongue of *No One Batted an Eye* (fig. 8) all provide the human viewer with recognizably human gestures with which to relate. Such acts of empathizing with what are ultimately inanimate sculptural objects goes beyond relating one's experiences with an unfamiliar other—it forces one to confront larger questions about the nature of organic life itself. In their article "The Storied Lives of Non-Human Narrators," Bernaerts et al. deconstruct this relationship:

Non-human narrators prompt [their audience] to project human experience onto creatures and objects that are not conventionally expected to have that kind of mental perspective (in other words, [they] "empathize" and "naturalize"); at the same time, [the audience has] to acknowledge the otherness of non-human narrators, who may question

⁴³ Adam Waytz, John Cacioppo, and Nicholas Epley, "Who Sees Human? The Stability and Importance of Individual Differences in Anthropomorphism," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 5, no. 3 (May 2010), 220.

⁴⁴ Adam Waytz, John Cacioppo, and Nicholas Epley, "Who Sees Human?," 222.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 224.

⁴⁶ Juliana Schroeder and Nicholas Epley, "Mistaking Minds and Machines: How Speech Affects Dehumanization and Anthropomorphism," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 145, no. 11 (November 2016), 1428.

⁴⁷ Frank May and Ashwani Monga, "When Time Has a Will of Its Own, the Powerless Don't Have the Will to Wait: Anthropomorphism of Time Can Decrease Patience," *Journal of Consumer Research* 40, no. 5 (February 2014), 926.

⁴⁸ Incidentally, much of the animist belief system is also generally rooted in perceived motion and an object's ability to produce sound. For further reading, see Spyros Papapetros, "Movements of the Soul: Traversing Animism, Fetishism, and the Uncanny," *Discourse* 34, no. 2-3 (Spring/Fall 2012): 185-208.

(defamiliarize) some of [their] assumptions and expectations about human life and consciousness.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Lars Bernaerts, Marco Caracciolo, Luc Herman, and Bart Varvaeck, “The Storied Lives of Non-Human Narrators,” *Narrative* 22, no. 1 (January 2014), 69.

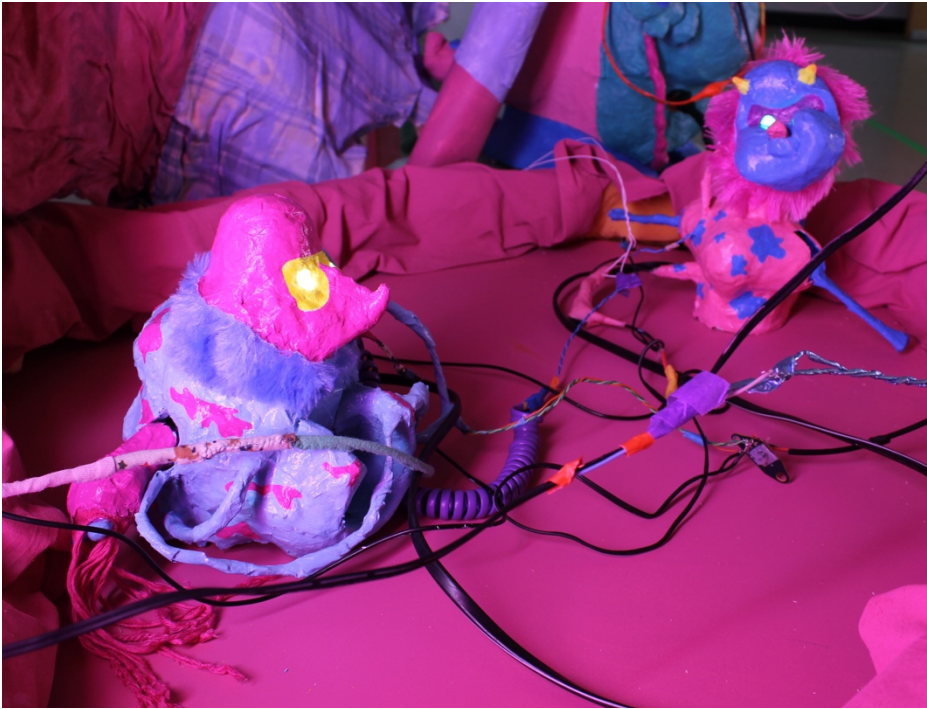


Fig. 7 *The Waddlers* (2020-2021). Found objects, papier-mâché, acrylic, electronics, and fabric.

Fig. 8 *No One Batted an Eye* (2019-2021). Analogue video, found objects, papier-mâché, acrylic, and fabric.



There is an inherent absurdity to the Fuzztopia installation. Fuzztopia has a story, a lore, and an internal logic; none of which are communicated directly (i.e. by means of the written word) to the audience. Simultaneously, the exhibition contains objects and materials that are recognizable—sewn fabric, old toys, painted paper, etc.—yet they are all presented in a context that asserts they are a part of the physiology of alien creatures and their ecosystem. The exhibition is largely predicated upon the tendencies of the human brain in the face of the fictional and the unfamiliar—a tendency largely of self-projecting as a means of understanding and internalizing. With regards to techniques developed in more conventional storytelling media such as literature and film—providing an audience with scenarios in which they can picture themselves, fostering a partial or explicit parasocial relationship with an audience, and incorporating a cast of anthropomorphic characters to communicate larger themes—they are all at the core of *Welcome to Fuzztopia*. However, unlike the specified media, this exhibition is one of real, physical objects; and, by extension, it is an experience of meaningful objects and their relationships.

As detailed earlier, the process of designing and assembling the Fuzztopians is a primal one, incorporating techniques and materials that have been significant to me for most of my life. These are all simple and familiar things to a person who has grown up in a North American context since the latter half of the 20th century,⁵⁰ and thus act as a source of familiarity within Fuzztopia. This provides the audience with a means and a reasoning to project themselves and their experiences onto the Fuzztopians—in other words, to empathize with them. Simultaneously, however, Fuzztopia cannot be divorced from this recognizability—one cannot view the installation as an alien world without taking into account the objects of which it is composed. This is ultimately because the objects themselves assert their own autonomy. Educator Bill Brown ascribes this autonomy to what he refers to as thing theory, which he details in the following passage:

As they circulate through our lives, we look *through* objects (to see[,] above all, what they disclose about *us*) [...]. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us[—]when their flow within circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested [...]. The story of objects asserting

⁵⁰ Sherry Mayo, “The Prelude to the Millennium: The Backstory of Digital Aesthetics,” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 42, no. 1 (Spring 2008), 101.

themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject [...]. You could imagine things, second, as what is excessive in objects[;] as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects—their force or sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems.⁵¹

This is the overarching dilemma of *Welcome to Fuzztopia*: the audience is intended to relate themselves to the fictional world in which they find themselves, but that world and its inhabitants maintain their own unique identity and autonomy regardless of their viewing public's interventions. The Fuzztopians are quirky and vibrant, but they are not toys to be purchased for one's own enjoyment.⁵² Fuzztopia is a quaint and eccentric space, but it does not exist *for* its audience. Fuzztopia's human interlocutors are put in a position where they are to think on their relationship to this fictional space while also respecting it as one over which they cannot claim ownership. Fuzztopia is a world of things—heavily worn things, antiquated things, forgotten things—who are in the process of reasserting their individuality. The cycle of consumption has been broken, and now it is time to listen to what these things have to say.

⁵¹ Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (Autumn 2001), 4-5.

⁵² Each piece in Fuzztopia is one-of-a-kind, and there are no plans on selling any of them at time of writing.

Chapter 4: The Aesthetics

The aesthetic qualities of the Fuzztopians and their planetoid are familiar to most contemporary North American audiences. The bright colors, extreme angles, rounded shapes, and eccentric textures have been adapted from contemporary children's media and cartooning. This is done to create a welcoming environment for Fuzztopian and audience member alike, while also embracing the language of contemporary visual culture as a means of communicating Fuzztopia's benevolent intent. *Welcome to Fuzztopia* is an exhibition that relies predominantly on visual communication. Any text that was originally printed on paper present in the show has either been completely painted over or warped into a non-textual abstract shape. Though many of the electronics in the exhibition originally spoke through pre-recorded English dialogue, their sound has been warped to be indecipherable. The verbalizations of the Fuzztopians are their means of communicating amongst themselves—an unfamiliar and incomprehensible language of electronic noise that further establishes them as a strange alien species. The conventional, intuitive, and direct means of communication on which humans often rely (namely writing and verbal speech) have been eschewed in favor of one based primarily on visual stimulus. As a result, however, the specificity and precision of these forms of language are not available for use by the Fuzztopians to communicate with their audience, and the danger of ambiguity and miscommunication threatens to emerge:

Despite [their] ubiquity as a “universal” aspect of human communication, [...] visual narratives are [not necessarily] *universally* understood. [...] While their iconicity allows for more widespread communication[,] pictures require familiarity to be understood [...]. When stored as systematic representations across individuals of a population, they constitute lexicons of different “visual languages” bound to historical, cultural, and/or functional contexts.⁵³

Though imbued with communicative power, it would be incorrect to assert that a visual language is an inherently universal one. Furthermore, unlike a sign language such as American Sign Language, the Fuzztopians' visual means of communicating with the humans around them is not strictly codified or clearly defined.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, visual languages have unique traits and

⁵³ Neil Cohn, “Visual narrative comprehension: Universal or not?,” *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 27, no. 2 (2020), 267.

⁵⁴ Dan I. Slobin, “Breaking the Molds: Signed Languages and the Nature of Human Language,” *Sign Language Studies* 8, no. 2 (Winter 2008), 124-125.

advantages as modes of communication. For instance, the mimetic vernacular of contemporary Internet communities is largely one of images. It is a dense, iterative form of communication, taking advantage of its participants' familiarity with its iconography to allow for conversations that occur simultaneously on interpersonal and socio-political levels.⁵⁵ Though it requires its participants to have a base familiarity with its iconography as a prerequisite for conversation, such a visual language has the capacity to foster types of interactions that simply cannot occur through conventional, verbal or written dialogue. If the imagery and signifiers of a visual language were to be based in a broadly common, shared aesthetic, then the number of people who could potentially comprehend it would be quite large—not as large as the entire population of the planet Earth, but it could conceivably be understood by entire nations of individuals. It is for this reason that the medium through which Fuzztopia most directly communicates with its human audience is the visual language of commercial culture.

As discussed previously, the fact that Fuzztopia is comprised of (often recognizable) found objects is the foundation of this entire body of work. Not only do objects have the capacity to function as characters and narrators with whom we can empathize in the context of fiction—objects are also a familiar, ever-present, and influential component of everyday human life.⁵⁶ Furthermore, the commercial object is particularly impactful and culturally relevant, as its function and aesthetic qualities are embedded into our everyday lives:

Everyday aesthetic sites include objects, events, and places that for most of us—children and adults alike—in economically developed countries form part of ordinary daily life. They are mainstream sites to which all but small minorities have regular access. [...] Even when they are irregularly accessed[,] they are well known because their signs regularly circulate through other everyday visual sites. Their references are familiar and together they help form the common culture.⁵⁷

Fuzztopia is thus an accumulation and amalgamation of the established commercial aesthetics and visual tropes that are present throughout the continent on which it was invented. The planetoid and its inhabitants communicate most clearly with their audience through their visual

⁵⁵ Matt Applegate and Jamie Cohen, "Communicating Graphically: Mimesis, Visual Language, and Commodification as Culture," *Cultural Politics* 13, no. 1 (March 2017), 83-84.

⁵⁶ Paul M. Camic, "From Trashed to Treasured: A Grounded Theory Analysis of the Found Object," *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* 4, no. 2 (2010), 81.

⁵⁷ Paul Duncum, "Theorising Everyday Aesthetic Experience with Contemporary Visual Culture," *Visual Arts Research* 28, no. 2 (2002), 5.

design—organic lumpy bodies, stretchy elongated limbs, brightly-colored skin and fur, and exaggerated facial expressions. It is only in immersing oneself into this visual language and growing accustomed to the environment through which it is spoken that one may grasp the exhibition's core message: Fuzztopia is a familiar place with friendly inhabitants, whose actions and gestures we can by extension enact in our own everyday lives in order to realize a world that is as safe and welcoming as Fuzztopia itself.

In addition to contemporary North American image culture, the visual language of Fuzztopia emerged in response to the works of visual artists whose aesthetic and thematic goals align with my own. Most notably, this includes the works of cartoonists Jim Woodring and André Franquin, game designer and artist Keita Takahashi, and stone carver Stefan Rinck.⁵⁸ At a glance, the similarities between these artists' work and my own are very apparent: Jim Woodring's wordless *Frank* comics depict the living and incomprehensibly strange world of the Unifactor; André Franquin's Marsupilami character is an absurd mishmash of extant animals (most clearly the leopard and the lemur), with an expressive and lively face and an impossibly long tail; Keita Takahashi's *Katamari Damacy* game depicts a planet Earth densely packed with objects and people, on which the extraterrestrial Prince of All Cosmos is tasked with collecting all manner of things in order to create stars; and Stefan Rinck's sculptural body of work consists of carved stone effigies whose physiologies are a chaotic blending of traditional sculptural subject matter and contemporary cartooning and character design. Though there are very clear visual similarities and specific instances of artistic inspiration between these artists' work and my own, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that there are much more intricate ties between these bodies of work. Woodring utilizes cartooning as a Surrealist exercise; as a means of tapping into an unconscious, foreign, autonomous world over which he claims to have little if any control.⁵⁹ Franquin's approach to drawing is fundamentally vivacious, incorporating angular, elastic lines and a bright color palette,⁶⁰ which complements the absurdly humorous characters and scenarios

⁵⁸ To a lesser extent, the television programs *Teletubbies* (1997), *Maisy Mouse*, and Naomi Iwata's *Gregory Horror Show* have also informed my visual language.

⁵⁹ Sam Thielman, "Jim Woodring: 'I am extremely interested in wrapping up Frank'," *The Guardian*, Guardian News & Media Limited, January 15, 2016, accessed July 19, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/15/jim-woodring-comic-book-frank-unifactor>.

⁶⁰ Matthew Screech, "André Franquin, Master of the Ninth Art," *Journal of Popular Culture* 33, no. 3 (Winter 1999), 98.

explored in his *Spirou* comics.⁶¹ A recurring theme throughout Takahashi's oeuvre is beauty hidden in the everyday: "I just like objects [...]. I wanted to make a video game to show people that ordinary stuff is important to us."⁶² Lastly, Rinck's artistic work is concerned with the convergent evolution of human visual languages throughout history; the codifying of iconography across multiple discrete cultures. This is his means of approximating a universal visual language through his sculptures—by tapping into our rich collective history of visual artistic representation.⁶³ It is in sifting through and dissecting the works of these artists that the aesthetic qualities of Fuzztopia have been able to emerge. Most notably, the work of Franquin and Takahashi have been a part of my life for most of my existence, and they have been instrumental in the formation of my own artistic voice. The aesthetic qualities of Fuzztopia are communal, and are derived from a continuously shifting image culture in which countless individuals have participated. Just as the social structure of Fuzztopia is one of symbiotic interdependency, the planetoid's visual language references and builds upon the work of others.

⁶¹ Screech, "André Franquin," 101.

⁶² Andrew Webster, "Katamari creator Keita Takahashi on why his games are both silly and serious," *The Verge*, Vox Media, LLC, December 17, 2019, accessed July 19, 2021, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/12/17/21025916/keita-takahashi-interview-wattam-katamari>.

⁶³ Sarah Schug, "In this Garden he Reads the Diary of the World | January 30 – March 20, 2021 | Sorry We're Closed | Brussels," *Stefan Rinck*, Stefan Rinck, accessed July 19, 2021, <https://www.stefanrinck.de/2021/02/04/in-this-garden-he-reads-the-diary-of-the-world-january-30-march-20-2021-sorry-were-closed-brussels/>.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Welcome to Fuzztopia is an accumulation of many different objects, media, and approaches to producing artwork. This project has been quite a large undertaking for myself; and though cliché, the term “labor of love” is an appropriate descriptor of this body of work—necessarily so.

Fuzztopia could never have emerged if it were not for my embracing of the myriad things that I hold dear: sculpture, cartooning, science fiction, storytelling, biology, electronics, and media criticism. Fuzztopia is a place of love, inhabited by creatures that love one another, who seek to inspire love in their human audience.

The labour that has gone into the creation of this exhibition has coincided with stress, anxiety, and exhaustion on my part at various points along the way—yet the project remains a net positive endeavor in my life, and it is my intent for this body of work to have a net positive impact on the lives of its audience. If I condense the work I do into very simple terms, and consider the question of why I make work, the answer at which I ultimately arrive is: because I wish to make a positive impact on the world. This is the foundational reason for Fuzztopia’s existence, and though it may seem to be a grandiose goal, I feel that this exhibition can achieve it on a small scale through very simple means.

In conceptualizing and assembling Fuzztopia, my tendency has been to imbue this project with as much energy, passion, and detail as possible (I am, after all, incredibly excited about this body of work). By contrast, however, I also recognize that there is power in restraint—in trusting the audience to navigate Fuzztopia as they wish. I cannot with complete authority dictate how the audience will interface with and perceive *Welcome to Fuzztopia*, and attempting to do so would run counter to my desire to create a welcoming and fun environment. In its totality, this exhibition is my best attempt with my current means and ability to realize a multimedia project that could potentially spur joy in an audience, and lead them to taking actions that could further spread that joy to others. It is by this means that I wish to positively impact the world, and perhaps aid it in becoming a Fuzztopia of its own.

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